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Serendipity and children's literature research

Experiments in the archive through the Newcastle Master Class

Children's literature studies has seen a growing interest in the archive over recent years. Indeed, Kenneth Kidd has suggested that archival work itself might be tangled up with the same impulses which shape our return to children's books, motivated by 'a desire to return to childhood experience as much as by the desire to discover something new' (17). Certainly children's books themselves have often been a venue for reflecting on the archive and the museum: one notable example is E.L. Konigsburg's classic *The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler* (1967). Set in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the book is a kind of excursion into the archive: the narrative itself forms part of Mrs Frankweiler's 'mixed-up files' and serves as an explanation of that collection. Konigsburg makes an explicit connection between the archival impulse and the desire for the child: the revelation of the secret hidden in Mrs Frankweiler's files is accompanied by the revelation of another secret, her unfulfilled desire to experience motherhood. The fact that the book concludes with its two child protagonists resolving to 'adopt' Mrs Frankweiler – making her 'the only woman in the world to become a grandmother with never becoming a mother first' (159) – suggests that the turn towards the archive can in some way produce access to the child. The narrative as a whole, however, is less concerned with the child (real or imagined) and more concerned with ways of being within or using the archive; it raises questions about playfulness and serendipity, and about the purpose of using the archive which this paper aims to explore more widely.

The experiments with which this paper is concerned were focused around an archive explicitly dedicated to children's books: Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books, located in Newcastle upon Tyne, is the UK's largest single collection of archive material relating to modern British children's literature. It features a wealth of material by figures such as Philip

Pullman, Diana Wynne Jones, Puffin editor Kaye Webb, and Edward Ardizzone. The choice of Worcester as host of the 22nd IRSCL Congress offered a welcome opportunity to invite international scholars to Newcastle to explore the archive. Katherine Capshaw, Kenneth Kidd, Michelle Martin, Philip Nel (USA), and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Anja Müller (Germany) happily joined Newcastle scholars Matthew Grenby, Lucy Pearson and Kimberley Reynolds for a two-day Master Class exploring the place of the archive in children's literature research. Scholars teamed up to focus on particular subtopics in two-hour sessions, with everyone participating in the full schedule. Bursaries funded by Newcastle University allowed us to offer free enrolment for some outstanding students of children's literature, who joined us not only from institutions around the UK but also from Ireland, the Netherlands, and Japan. The intention was not only to offer these students the opportunity to work with some leading scholars from the field, but also to open up the ideas of established scholars through collaboration with these rising stars. We aimed to expand our knowledge of the Seven Stories collection, and to probe our understanding of where the archive fits within children's literature studies, how it might be used, and how archive thinking and practice might evolve.

The venue for the IRSCL Congress was serendipitous, and it was serendipity which formed the focus of the session developed by Kenneth Kidd and Lucy Pearson, who worked with materials from the Seven Stories collections to explore the role of play and happenstance (as well as the terms of 'success' and 'failure') in archival research. Typically associated with important happy accidents in science, serendipity has a broad relevance across the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences. In fact, the first use of the term in English was by English art historian Horace Walpole, in a letter to Horace Mann discussing the Persian tale 'Peregrinaggio di Tre Giovani, Figliuoli del re di Serendippo' ('Adventures of Three young Men, Sons of the King of Serendippo'), whose heroes, wrote Walpole, 'were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of' (409). The evolving literature suggests that serendipity is less a fortunate happenstance

than a structure of expectation – a cultivated receptivity to stimulus or experience. The social science methodology of ‘grounded theory,’ for instance, begins not with a pre-directed research question but rather with the accumulation and coding of data, with an eye toward seeing what patterns emerge. In traditional research, the researcher collects data to confirm or challenge an existing theory; in grounded-theory research, data is collected to generate observations and theories. In *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949), sociologist Robert K. Merton speaks of the ‘serendipity pattern,’ describing the experience of encountering an unanticipated result in research, which then occasions a new theory or the extension of an existing one. Merton later co-authored with Elinor Barber *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity*, which traces the origins and uses of the term and elaborates upon serendipity as an investigative method.

Most such literature is cheerfully upbeat about the possibility of eliciting or at least preparing for serendipity. It doesn't typically see itself as further *constructing* serendipity, however, and that's where Maria Tamboukou takes the discussion a step further, asking ‘why has serendipity become a *sine qua non* of archival research?’ (151). She holds that what we call serendipity is a messy combination of good fortune and ‘the dim area of perceptive experience,’ which may or may not be conscious – and may or may not be cultivable. We find certain material or experiences, she believes, in part because we are ‘situated readers or listeners ... drawn to certain storylines, topics, characters or themes and not to others’ (154). More to the point, she underscores what we might call a serendipity fetish among contemporary scholars (she doesn't call it that herself), especially within the personal turn in archive storytelling (on such, see Burton; and Kirsch and Rohan). And even if serendipity can and should be cultivated, as we tend to believe, there are significant challenges along the way, among them the sheer scale of discoverable material, alongside the current push for efficiency and instrumentality in research. We hoped with our Master Class to spotlight the benefits as well as challenges of seeking serendipity – and to experiment with some methods, which must remain experimental and provisional if they are to be useful.

The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler models one kind of laboratory or holding environment for serendipity. The book tells the story of Claudia and her brother Jamie, who run away to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where they chance upon the newly acquired statue of an angel. Determined to find out more about the statue, they successfully locate a newspaper story about the Angel, but overlook a story in the same paper about their own disappearance. The narrator (Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler herself) draws attention to the limitations of too narrow a research goal, commenting, 'Claudia had found the article about the statue too easily. The search is often more profitable than the goal. Keep that in mind when you're looking for something in my files' (60). As this comment suggests, for Mrs Basil E Frankweiler, serendipity is more valuable than research 'success'. The 'mixed-up' nature of her files is designed to encourage such serendipity: they are in 'a special order that only makes sense to [her]' (140). When she gives the children access to her files so that they can find out the true provenance of the Angel, this 'special order' forces them to employ a kind of structured browsing through every drawer, searching not only for the specific information they want but for the many contexts in which the Angel might be considered. Only once they have embraced this more lateral approach to research are they able to make the serendipitous connection that leads them to the information they are seeking.

Although the children in Konigsburg's novel do have a specific goal in mind, it is clear that Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler's idiosyncratic cataloguing has created the right conditions for serendipitous discoveries. Similarly, real life accounts of serendipity in the archive are often related to the vagaries of cataloguing. Who among us hasn't hoped for an experience like that of Katharine Kittredge, who after a decade of research on the eighteenth century writer Melesina Trench discovered that the Beinecke Library contained not the modest thirty items listed in the catalogue, but a treasure trove of over three hundred items documenting a hitherto unrecorded period of Melesina's life (Kittredge and Liu)? As Kittredge's experience suggests, however, such serendipitous discoveries are difficult to construct since they often depend on *failures* of cataloguing.

In devising a session around serendipity in the archive, Kenneth and Lucy were faced with precisely this issue: how to reproduce the experience of serendipitous browsing within an archive which is not ‘mixed-up’ but rather orderly, catalogued by an archivist who seeks to aid the researcher rather than to ‘make it harder’ (Mrs Frankweiler’s professed goal)? And how, with a group of students we had never met before, could we facilitate the kind of personal connection to the material which is one important element of Mrs Frankweiler’s archival ‘experiment’? This challenge was all the more vexing given the time constraints of our session and the Master Class. It’s gratifying to chance upon a serendipitous discovery after days and even weeks in the archive; less so to attend a Master Class which might only reproduce the disappointments preceding such discoveries. In designing our tasks, then, we were seeking a model which could offer a kind of constructed serendipity, and one which would enable us to reflect on the contingent nature of the archive.

We started by inviting two of the Master Class students to generate material for the session. Roisin McCloskey (Durham University, UK) was asked to reflect on the role of serendipity in her own research and to produce a set of working guidelines for encouraging serendipity, while Sarah Pyke (Roehampton University, UK) presented her reflections on a browsing experiment that Kenneth had previously tried at Florida in the context of a graduate seminar. (Sarah’s fabulous paper follows shortly.) We also asked the students to create an account of their own ‘archives’ through a commonplace book exercise:

Commonplace Book. For at least a week prior to our classes, keep a commonplace book noting down the material you generate as ‘literary figures’. What might interest a future scholar interested in your career as a literary figure? Think about:

- *Critical work (essays, notes, etc.)*
- *Creative work (drafts of poems, creative writing, etc.)*
- *Evidence of your cultural consumption (reading notes, physical books, reviews, cinema tickets, etc.)*
- *Correspondence*

This exercise was designed to switch the students' position from that of archive *users* to archive *subjects*. This attempt to return to origins – an impulse which Derrida suggests is at the heart of the archive – proved a productive way of opening up our thoughts.

The first theme to emerge when we discussed students' experiences of producing their commonplace books was their sense of uncertainty about what should be included or omitted. The production of the commonplace book as a 'collection' is generated implies the possibility of 'comprehensive' documentation, but as Ann Blair has shown, the commonplace book has its roots in a culture which was profoundly concerned with the *impossibility* of including every possible cultural object. In fact, it is a 'tool for storing and retrieving the increasingly unwieldy quantity of textual and personal knowledge'; in other words, it is a sort of personal archive catalogue (542). As such, it proved a useful device for reflecting upon the contingencies of the archive. Indeed, one of our aims in developing this exercise was to expose how ephemeral much of this material was and thus how vulnerable to loss: in other words, to highlight the serendipity involved in the very creation of the archive. In keeping with the theme of the session, however, the discussion went in a very different direction, connecting us to a range of issues which we had not intended. Although we had provided both a goal for the exercise – the books should reflect the students' position as 'literary figures' – and suggested some possibilities for inclusion, the majority of students reported finding the exercise difficult. What constituted their 'literary lives'? What, precisely, should be included? In documenting themselves as 'literary figures', they wondered, should the trip to see the latest blockbuster film be included alongside their notes on a piece of literary criticism? One student raised the question of boundaries around the types of artefacts which might be included: in documenting our cultural lives, do we include only the 'thing itself' (the book, the concert, the lecture) or all those things associated with it (the receipt from the bookshop, the Tube ticket from the journey which took us to the event)? In other words, this act of archiving or curating through the commonplace book exercise brought us

directly to the question Derrida suggests is *the* question of the archive: ‘where does the outside [of the archive] commence’ (12)?

The tensions around the boundaries of the archive were most acute when students reflected on their digital lives. The sheer amount of digital material that could potentially be recorded posed one challenge: how, they asked, can we record every link idly clicked upon? Conversely, while much of this material might be lost (or difficult to access), the ease of digital storage heightened the possibility of serendipitous rather than planned collection: one student commented that the USB flash drive on which she had saved her paper might be a more complete – and perhaps more honest – reflection of her cultural life than the curated space of the commonplace book. The permeable boundaries of the digital archive created some anxiety around the possibility that too *much* might be included. One student cited a conversation held over Facebook about her latest research: this seemed relevant to the commonplace exercise. But collecting such material (much more easily archived than spoken conversation) begins to blur the boundaries between the public self and the private self. Antoinette Burton suggests that ‘the possibility that ‘everything’ might be an archive’ produces anxiety for historians because of the ways ‘it strikes at the heart of the evidentiary elitism of the discipline’ (5). Because of the dual subject position of the commonplace book exercise, however, which asked students to act as both archivists and archive subjects, a different anxiety was in evidence: anxiety about the possibility that the archive might expose too *much*. This was interestingly heightened by the lack of clarity in our assignment itself: we had not specified whether the commonplace books were to be shared with the group and the format of the Master Class thus set up the possibility that students’ commonplace books would be scrutinised by both some of the best and brightest among their peers, and by ‘masters’ in the field (however dubious the latter classification). In fact, we had not planned for students to share their commonplace books, but by failing to make this clear we inadvertently (serendipitously) drew attention to archives as ‘monuments to particular configurations of power’, and to the potentially vulnerable nature of the

archive subject (Hamilton *et al*, 8). Several students expressed discomfort at the thought of including draft material in the archive and thus exposing their ‘failures’ to potentially critical readers, a discomfort which was shared by the majority of people in the room. Ironically, as literary scholars, we are often most excited by precisely this kind of material: reflecting on our relationship to our own imagined archives brings us face to face with what David Greetham has called the ‘contingent, temporary, and culturally self-referential, even self-laudatory’ nature of the archive (9). We were forced to recognise that the process of actively collecting and preserving an archive is often one which attempts to *exclude* serendipity by curating a particular image of the archive subject. By contrast, the ‘unplanned archive’ may owe its existence to the action of chance: the Faith Jaques archive, which was rescued at the eleventh hour from a house clearance and arrived at Seven Stories jumbled into black bin-bags, is an extreme example of such a case. Yet unlike Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler’s files, such collections are rarely allowed to remain ‘mixed-up’: the collection description in the Faith Jaques catalogue notes that ‘every effort has been made to reconstruct the original system of arrangement. Where such reconstruction has not been possible, a meaningful system has been imposed on material’ (Faith Jaques Collection, FJ). As scholars, where we do encounter ‘mixed-up’ files, we frequently seek to impose a meaningful system of our own, closing down some of the possible avenues of enquiry in pursuit of our own goal.

One means of inviting serendipity, then, is to resist the imposition of such a system. Allowing yourself to be carried along by the search rather than pushing forward in search of a goal can create a space for new kinds of thinking and the opportunity to make unexpected connections. It is interesting, for example, that when we asked Roisin to produce a set of guidelines for encouraging serendipitous moments in research, she started by advising students to ‘work systematically rather than waiting for serendipity, or inspiration, or luck’, suggesting that serendipity is born out of ‘time and effort’. As she understood, planning too deliberately for serendipity might be counterproductive. This resonates with the archival experience Konigsburg offers in *The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs Basil E.*

Frankweiler: it is Jamie's serendipitous use of the word 'baloney' which allows Claudia to guess that information on the Angel will be filed under 'Bologna' (the place where the statue was found), but she is only able to make this connection because of the research she and Jamie have already done. Roisin drew a similar distinction between serendipity and luck, suggesting that serendipity in research does not consist of a single 'bolt from the blue' but is generated through the combination of curiosity, patience, and willingness to move beyond what we perceive as the boundaries of our chosen topic. Roisin's guidelines resonate with Tamboukou's assertion that serendipitous discoveries occur because we are 'situated readers or listeners' (154); Roisin suggested a series of strategies designed to situate our research narratives within a wider context, such as sharing work with others, attending lectures only loosely connected with our research program, and varying the terms of our enquiry.

Another such strategy is browsing. Lucy and Kenneth adapted an assignment that Kenneth had developed for his Fall 2014 graduate archive studies seminar, a course designed to take advantage of the University of Florida's Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature, one of the largest such collections in the world with about 120,000 volumes. Unlike *Seven Stories*, the Baldwin is technically a historical library and not a repository for manuscripts and other original documents. The course was designed to encourage students not only to pursue archival work but also to vary their methods of encounter and analysis. Archive work is often motivated by a pre-existing investigation; you are looking for something, if not something in particular, then something of a particular sort. What happens if you encounter the archive with open curiosity and (more or less) an open agenda? Browsing has the potential to alleviate archive anxiety, too, to connect the archive with play and discovery (on this, see Carolyn Steedman's *Dust*).

Kenneth asked his Baldwin students to try one of five alternative methods for discovery and reflection: browsing; distant reading; textual criticism; avant-garde invention games; and what Gaston Bachelard calls *topoanalysis*. Of these, browsing and distant reading are mostly discovery

activities, whereas the other methods assume you've found material and want to do something interesting with it. Browsing and distant reading proved the most popular options, not surprisingly. Working off Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, several students experimented engagingly with quantitative approaches to Baldwin holdings. Most students, however, tried the browsing prompt, based on Geoffrey O'Brien's *The Browser's Ecstasy: A Meditation on Reading*:

Browsing as Research Method. Chapters 15-18 of O'Brien's The Browser's Ecstasy make a distinction between browsing and 'proper reading' (63), and those chapters especially, and book at large, is a kind of browsing experiment or report. Browsing occurs somewhere between aimless drifting and focused research; it's academic channel surfing or skimming. It isn't as explicitly instrumentalist as traditional research; it's without a clear purpose. That doesn't mean it's entirely unmotivated. But its logic is associative. Browsing allows flirtation with interests and objects. It might be a bit harder to browse in the Baldwin, but it can be done, and you can certainly browse in the digital collection. For this option, devise and report on a browsing project, explaining the terms and reflecting upon the activity as a mode of information gathering or the satisfaction of desire. O'Brien provides one model. What does browsing look like or do as a research method? What can be learned or unlearned?

Typically we browse when we have time and leisure and when we are less invested in outcome or pay-off. The underlying assumption is that browsing is preliminary to research proper (if indeed it is anything at all), perhaps akin to free writing or even day-dreaming. Lucy and Kenneth wondered, is that necessarily or always the case? Can we – should we – browse deliberately, strategically? Or does programmed browsing undermine the experience? We should say at the outset that we recognize the complaint that some students do nothing *but* browse these days; meaning that in the eyes of some observers at least, systematic research has yielded to improvisational and usually online surfing of sources. Maybe that's true, and maybe it isn't: we are agnostic on that front. Here we concentrate on the benefits of adding browsing to our repertoire of research strategies.

Master Class student Sarah Pyke's experiment in library browsing, conducted in advance of the Newcastle meeting, featured below, points to the possibilities for serendipity and productive self-reflection in that technique. She makes some fascinating observations about the library, about herself, and about browsing as an activity that's pleasurable and productive, if potentially unsettling.

On browsing: Adventures in the stacks (Sarah Pyke)

To be allocated the task of devising and reflecting on a browsing project for a session on ‘Serendipity in the Archive’ seemed a kind of serendipity in itself. The spark for my eventual PhD proposal was something I had stumbled upon around a decade earlier; Alison Hennegan’s essay about the reciprocal relationship between reading and emerging sexuality, ‘On Becoming a Lesbian Reader’. In her account of finding and choosing books in childhood and adolescence by a process she refers to as ‘the pricking of my thumbs’, Hennegan records how she ‘became aware of and learned to rely on’ this phenomenon: ‘a capacity which led me, unfailingly and time and time again, to the ‘right’ book for me, however unlikely its disguise’ (166).

I have since become fascinated by people’s various reading processes and practices, and particularly the kind of immersive, trance-like play of the browser described so well by Geoffrey O’Brien in *The Browser’s Ecstasy*: ‘my hands and eyes move among pages encountered at random’ (53). In my doctoral research, I am interviewing LGBTQ adults about their memories of books and reading in childhood and adolescence – which feels like browsing at one remove, rifling through the snippets and fragments of memories that my narrators are generous enough to share with me. And like many people – including those I have interviewed – my own memories of reading and books in childhood are often of the promise of immersion in a dizzying surplus of books: sitting or standing mesmerised in front of the bookshelves; the stack brought home from the library and piled up ready to read.

All this is by way of illustrating the web of associations and connections I personally make when asked to consider browsing, serendipity and children’s literature. However, I was completely unprepared for how challenging I would in practice find it to couple the delicious experience of losing myself in books for an unspecified amount of time – with no thought to referencing, papers,

quotations, chapters or theory – with an attempt to evaluate that experience as a legitimate research method.

O'Brien distinguishes browsing from 'proper reading', which is 'a task, with [...] procedures, regulations, orders [and] foreseeable consequences' (63). Determined to behave as *improperly* as possible then, my only condition for beginning this project was that I needed to find a place that would allow me, in O'Brien's phrase, the 'juxtaposition of many books' (53). As I live in Cambridge, the obvious choice was the University Library, a copyright library which holds a staggering eight million volumes, allows you to wander the stacks at will, has its own lovable idiosyncrasies, and is rumoured to have as many floors below street level as above it. As it states on the library website, 'With over two million volumes housed on open shelves, you can benefit from immediate access and *unparalleled opportunities for browsing*' [my emphasis]. I jettisoned the idea of anything as restrictive as a research question, and decided simply to follow up on what piqued my curiosity in the moment.

'Browsing' is originally an agricultural term – the first book I called up on the library catalogue, IJ Gordon and HH Prins's *The Ecology of Browsing and Grazing*, surprised me with this fact, and a sideways venture into the *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms it: from the sixteenth century 'to browse' has been 'To feed on the leaves and shoots of trees and bushes; to crop the shoots or tender parts of rough plants for food'. Only in 1821 did it become a metaphor for reading, thanks to Charles Lamb, in his essay 'Mackery End, In Hertfordshire': 'She was tumbled early, by accident or design, into a spacious closet of good old English reading, without much selection or prohibition, and browsed at will upon that fair and wholesome pasturage' (87).

So, I browse the UL. I am a deer, or maybe a goat, nibbling at a bit of whatever takes my fancy. I saunter past the shelves and stop whenever a book looks particularly interesting. I find *Sheep of the World* – which seems appropriate. Browsing is a surprisingly *physical* method of research. As I gather books on my trek from South Front 6 to North Wing 4, up and down the stairs, along the

corridors, their musty smell trails me and their cumulative weight is surprising. *Tunnelling '91* was another title glimpsed sideways, which again seemed strangely apt. (There are, I discovered, *Tunnelling* annuals stretching back several decades.)

The physical arrangement of the books means that I find myself wandering into whole other disciplines. It is an unnerving experience, like walking by accident into a conference or seminar room, the room falling silent, the participants turning to you expectantly, as you realise you don't understand a word of what's being discussed. I blundered, like this, into metaphysics. Here is a short extract from Crawford L Elder's *Familiar Objects and their Shadows*: 'Most contemporary metaphysicians are sceptical about the reality of familiar objects such as dogs and trees, people and desks, cells and stars.' Instead, 'Tiny microparticles 'dogwise arranged' explain the appearance, they say, that there are dogs' (i). However, I was interested and amused to still be able to find some kind of a link to children's literature, however tenuous – the contents page bafflingly referred to something called 'Pushmipullyu representations', but *I* know perfectly well that the 'pushmi-pullyu' is, in Hugh Lofting's *Doctor Doolittle*, the 'rarest animal of all'. Anthropology, on the other hand, was an after-party populated by freaks and misfits. O'Brien writes about the power of titles, 'their pristine, uncompromised mysteriousness', and I found this more than ever when I reached that particular region of the stacks: who could resist such books as *Lifeworlds*, *Savage Anxieties* and, my personal favourite, *Rolling in Ditches with Shamans*? How could their contents ever hope to measure up to the allure of their spines and covers?

I soon realised that the usual markers for the success or otherwise of a stint in the library no longer applied. What am I looking for? Am I making progress? Did I have a productive day? The answer to all of these questions was, more often than not, *I don't know*. What I did discover though, was a sense of calm, overlaid with an unexpected playfulness, occasionally punctuated by delight at stumbling across something that seemed meaningful or amusing or both. Frustration, also – when a particular title appears as available in the library catalogue, but is mysteriously absent from the

shelves. This leads to the uncanny feeling that the very same book you are hunting for is perhaps being read at that very moment, elsewhere in the library, if only you could find it.

I tried a little bibliomancy of my own – opening books at random, selecting the first passage my eye fell on, and using it to reveal some truth or divine some meaning – and I was genuinely shocked when, in the first volume I experimented with, anthropologist Michael Jackson's *Lifeworlds*, this sentence leapt out at me: 'Divination provides a compelling example of this interplay between domestic and wild space, for in divination one gains second sight or insight into the normally invisible forces that surround one's mundane lifeworld' (15). Odd as it may sound, I did find patterns and repeated motifs emerging as I browsed. Point lace, point-lace, pointlace – the thing about browsing is that you don't diligently record your references and you move on at the slightest provocation, so you'll just have to trust me when I say that this unfamiliar word crossed my path three times during my days in the library. The final time was in Adrienne Rich's poem, 'Love in the Museum', in which she describes a figure in a painting as 'A point-lace queen of manners' (113). A swift Google revealed an intricately woven lace fabric which seemed an apt visual metaphor for the kinds of connections between texts and concepts that O'Brien describes being activated or revealed in browsing, and to which I certainly felt myself becoming increasingly more alert. Google helpfully suggested that perhaps I meant 'pointless' instead, and indeed, it doesn't do too well to examine precisely the *point* of browsing while you're in the act (as O'Brien says, it's hard to justify); you need a certain amount of confidence, intellectual and physical, to allow yourself to move freely through the stacks in this way. This kind of archival flâneurie has precedent. Mike Featherstone writes about 'the flâneur who wanders the archival textual city in a half-dreamlike state in order to be open to the half-formed possibilities of the material and sensitive to unusual juxtapositions and novel perceptions', citing Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias's unorthodox uses of the British and French national libraries, 'reading seemingly haphazardly 'on the diagonal'' (594).

Browsing is a process of gleaning and accretion. The second pattern that began to reveal itself to me was connected to ice and ice-skating. From an essay on serendipity in which the author Simon Winchester described hopping off an Arctic icebreaker on the Pacific island of Ascension, I sidestepped into Jenny Diski's memoir *Skating to Antarctica*, and then across to Adrienne Rich, who in striving for a new feminist criticism, a re-visioning of old texts, writes of the 'challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography', 'a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find a language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into' (91). I began thinking about skating and skimming as a reading practice, and was not altogether surprised, then, to find that O'Brien's account ends with a similar image of the browser: 'here they find as much peace as they ever will, the slightly frantic peace of katydids and ice-skaters' (152).

It seems widely agreed that such serendipitous discoveries arise from a combination of chance, perceptiveness and *preparedness* in the searcher. The lesbian author Lee Lynch expresses something of this when she writes of her childhood and adolescent reading process, one she named 'cruising the libraries': 'Often wrong, always hopeful, my gay antennae never rested [...]' Immediately my feelers twitched and I was searching for more [...] I could have taught a course in gay lit. by the time I hit college' (41-43). You have to know what you're looking for, but the trick is not look too hard, or too directly at it.

I would like to end on a note of warning. Browsing is addictive. It is remarkably hard to know when to stop. And rather like the pointlace or the ice crystals I had begun to think about during my days in the library, at the time, everything you read begins to seem persuasively interdependent and vital, and yet when I looked back over my notes I found this sense of cohesion deceptively ethereal; it began to unravel, to melt away until I could no longer pin it down into any grand overarching conclusion. O'Brien writes satirically of the 'secluded scholar' with an inflated sense of their own importance who 'begins to gauge how inextricable are the patterns that waited only for his eye to pick them out from the camouflaging mass of irrelevant detail' (118-119). In browsing, you

may be following some kind of a path, or tramping down your own path as you go, but it is unlikely to be, as O'Brien puts it, 'the path to the solution of all the mysteries' (119). I found browsing a way to bring playfulness, delight, and associative, creative thinking to research – not, perhaps, a research method to use in isolation, but a useful phase to allow yourself to go through as you work on what it is that intrigues or frustrates you, or as a tool to get un-stuck. It is a technique that James H. Austin, in *Chase, Chance, and Creativity*, recommends to research scientists – suggesting the fledgling researcher 'try many different things on for size' and reminding the reader that 'your best work will be a projection of self' (185). Browsing will perhaps allow you, as Iain Morley and Mark de Rond put it in *Serendipity: Fortune and the Prepared Mind*, to 'recombine[e]...observations into unusual but meaningful associations' and make that serendipitous discovery that only you could make, but that will seem to have been waiting for you all along (3).

* * *

While not taking up the question of serendipity as such, students from Kenneth's Baldwin seminar echoed some of Sarah's insights, among them that browsing is addictive and somewhat crazy-making. One wondered if her own need to seek patterns from seemingly random data approached the condition known as *apophenia*. Most concluded that no matter how much you try to look without expectation, you will find things in which you're already interested (since wherever you go, there you are). They also reflected on the situatedness of the Baldwin and the Baldwin browsing experience. Whereas Sarah worked with the open-stacks and huge general library at Cambridge, thus giving her browsing great range in text and topic, the Baldwin is a closed-stacks collection of historical children's books. Access to the Baldwin was only possible with the generous supervision of Suzan Alteri, the Baldwin's curator and co-convenor of our course. Time, too, was a constraint, as the Baldwin isn't open all day and as Suzan has other obligations. Students could only browse for several

hours at a time, and also had to do so in groups, which further made the situation seem artificial (since browsing is ostensibly ‘natural’, carefree, unsupervised, etc.). On top of that, the Baldwin's shelving system is idiosyncratic, making for some amusing experiences or patterns. Books are shelved according to their size and the date of their acquisition, which means that wildly different titles often sit aside one another. These juxtapositions were both boon and obstacle to browsing, bringing us closer to that mixed-up filing of Mrs. Frankweiler.

Kenneth's students had visited the stacks once before as a group, and some of the browsers began with materials they had noticed previously. One student, Rebecca McNulty, decided to exploit both her own interests and the odd layout of the Baldwin by organizing her browse around an in-the-stacks (not catalogue-assisted) search for a copy of one of her favourite titles, J. K. Rowling's *The Sorcerer's Stone*. The Potter books, she reminds us in her playful report to Kenneth, are full of library scenes and serendipitous discoveries, so Rebecca determined to browse until she finds the book, undertaking the experiment with both seriousness and a touch of irony. She found the book pretty quickly. Meanwhile, in the book, our young wizards search in the Hogwarts library for the name of Nicolas Flamel (a real-life medieval alchemist) using varied methods: systematic searching (Hermione – naturally), open stacks browsing (Ron), and closed-stacks browsing (Harry, in the Restricted Section). They meet with no success, however, until Harry serendipitously comes across the name on one of his Chocolate Frog Cards, which in turn reminds Hermione that she's actually stashed away a library book which Flamel is discussed. Here is ‘research’ serendipity of a sort, Rebecca underscores, with little thanks to proper research and strategic browsing – the (accidental?) browsing of Chocolate Frog Cards saves the day. Kenneth asked Rebecca if this was a cautionary tale about strategic browsing, and wisely, she wouldn't say.

The final section of our Newcastle session on serendipity was devoted to physical browsing of archive materials from Seven Stories. Working on the details the students provided when they applied for the Master Class, and in light of their reflections on serendipity thus far, we identified

collections which it seemed to us might hold some resonance for each individual scholar. Reflecting on Roisin's work on childhood abnormality and precocity in nineteenth century fiction, for example, we chose archive material on *Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf* by child psychologist Catherine Storr. In order to help situate the students 'within' this material even before they arrived at the archive, we suggested relevant texts for them to read. When we presented the students with the material itself, though, we did not specify a goal: we hoped that approaching the material without a specific goal might help open up some of the possibilities and pleasures of the search.

We had started our planning for what we became the serendipity session by considering failures and disappointments. It's appropriate, then – if somewhat chastening – that the portion of our session devoted to the archive itself felt something of a failure. Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler is able to enjoy Claudia and Jamie's moment of serendipitous discovery, but no such moment occurred in our session (or at least we didn't witness one). Indeed, after the two stimulating presentations from Sarah and Roisin, and the lively debate occasioned by the commonplace book exercise, we had all too little time to browse through the archive and still less to discuss the students' discoveries. Yet this failure of time itself pointed towards perhaps the most crucial aspect of serendipity. At the end of *The Mixed-up Files*, Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler rejects the children's notion that you should 'learn something every day', telling them 'you should learn, of course, and some days you should learn a good deal. But you should also have days when you allow what is already in you to swell up inside of you until it touches everything' (152). This process of absorbing knowledge and allowing time for reflection is the essential basis for serendipity. Predictably, our students did not experience any sudden flashes of inspiration in the two hours we had allowed for our Master Class session. However, by opening up a space for them to browse these collections and reflect not only on the materials, but on the creation, organisation, and materiality of the archive, we may have helped to develop the foundation for such inspiration in the future. Months, years, or decades from now, they

may connect their experiences in Newcastle with another piece of the puzzle collected through their research life, and experience a true moment of serendipity.

The relationship between moments of serendipity and space for reflection is perhaps one reason for the association between serendipity and the archive. In the increasingly crowded world of contemporary academia, archival research represents time out from our day-to-day lives and commitments. We make special journeys to archive collections, and when there we may be asked to surrender our computers and refrain from talking to those around us. The physical qualities of the material are such that we are obliged to slow down: we don white gloves, lift each fragile page with care, and pore over unfamiliar handwriting. Indeed, as Steedman has shown, the barriers and hardships associated with archival research are often fetishised in accounts of the archive, despite the fact that many researchers will never encounter a collection of this nature (x). Perhaps this fetishisation stems from the potential for reflection represented by such experiences. We *want* the archive to be a secluded space guarded by metaphorical dragons, because this offers the respite from our quotidian responsibilities that we crave. However, such freedom is increasingly under threat. Visits to the archive are now often squeezed into as short a time as possible, and the pressure to justify our research time discourages us from simply browsing without a clear aim. The possibilities offered by the digital archive also represent a threat to our time: if we can access the archive from our own desks, how do we recreate the solitary, uninterrupted experience of the traditional archive?

All such questions, of course, are framed in a context of privilege. For many scholars, both the time for long periods browsing the archive, and the money or institutional affiliation which allows visits to significant physical collections has always been out of reach. The power structures of the archive are reinforced by these pragmatic considerations. The digital archive represents an opportunity to redress the balance somewhat: independent scholars, those from developing countries, scholars with disabilities or care-giving responsibilities, and many others can benefit from access to digitised collections. Some libraries are even becoming fully ‘bookless’: the library at Florida

Polytechnic University, for example, which opened in 2014, is staffed by a six-person library team but contains no physical books; it is ‘11,000 square feet of gleaming metal and glass’, as Gill Partington comments, ‘housing not a single printed volume’ (301). Instead, the collection is entirely digital, and students are encouraged to organise their research findings electronically, using a cloud-based system to save articles of interest, rather than printing hard copies. Opening up the archive beyond the confines of the physical collection and its limited hours of availability might enable new possibilities for serendipity. Repeated returns to the digital archive could allow the kind of semi-structured browsing we explored through our Master Class exercises. And if the barriers between the physical and the digital archive are ever more permeable, as demonstrated by the ‘bookless’ library, then this may have associated implications for the processes and practices of browsing in the archive. Barbara Fister, noting students’ reluctance to browse – ‘most of the books are too old and all of them are too long’ – suggests that other forms of digital ‘grazing’, including attention to the semi-curated ‘stream of ideas’ that is the academic Twitter feed, might spark a reciprocal interest in, or ability to take advantage of, ‘strategies for successful serendipity’ in archival spaces as local as a single index or bibliography, or wide-ranging as the open stacks. Furthermore, as our experiments revealed, the intersection between serendipity and the archive is as much about habits of thought as about the archive itself. The playfulness inherent in browsing experiments like the one Sarah undertook is a useful antidote to the narrow focus which is sometimes produced by the constant pressure to produce ‘research outputs’, promoting a willingness to take risks and to venture into unexpected territory. As a final reflection on serendipity and children’s literature research, we might recall Graham Greene’s apposite comments on childhood reading: ‘in childhood all books are books of divination, telling us about the future [...] I suppose that is why books excited us so much’ (13).

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